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The Impact of Family Structure on Children

Children in the United States grow up in a variety of family structures. Single parent families and two-parent families are created and recreated through marriage, divorce, remarriage, cohabitation and births outside of marriage. One-third of all children are born to unmarried mothers (Bumpass, 1984). The evolving structure of the family over the past 40 years is one of the fundamental changes in American society. In 1960, only 12% of children spent all, or part, of their childhood apart from one or more of their biological parents. By 1995, this number had increased to approximately 40% (McLanahan 1997). The decline of the “traditional” family has spawned a large literature attempting to measure the importance of family structure in determining child/youth outcomes. Although some may argue that one will find little to no evidence that youths who spend more years in single parent or stepparent households have worse outcomes than youths from intact households, many studies prove that children raised in unstable family homes perform more poorly in school and are more likely to become sexually active, commit illegal acts, and use illegal drugs at young ages.

With the increasing diversity of family structures, it has been estimated that in 1992 only 59% of children lived with both biological parents (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1994). Psychologist Judith Wallerstein followed a group of children of divorce from the 1970s into the 1990s. Interviewing them at 18 months and then 5, 10, 15 and 25 years after the divorce, she expected to find that they had bounced back. But what she found was dismaying: Even 25 years after the divorce, these children continued to experience substantial expectations of failure, fear of loss, fear of change and fear of conflict. Twenty-five years! (Desai 2007) The question I am left with is since many children will grow up in non-traditional families, how can families diminish some of the negative effects associated with non-intact families? Research has shown that parent expectations are an important predictor in student’s educational outcomes and that raising the educational expectations parents have for their children may be one way parents can mediate the negative consequences associated with non-traditional family structure. (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969; Schneider & Coleman, 1993).

The argument for children raised in unstable family homes perform more poorly in school is statistically backed up by Barbara Schneider, Allison Atteberry and Ann Owen article stating Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1998), in an analysis of retrospective data provided by over 13,000 adults participating in the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) More than 20 percent of young people from two-parent biological families left home to attend college, whereas only 10 percent to 15 percent of students from other types of families did so. In addition, changes in family structure, especially the introduction of a stepparent, had negative effects on college attendance rates, particularly if this change occurred during adolescence. Overall, a majority of evidence suggests that being in a non-traditional family can be a disadvantage for a child about to enter formal schooling, a disadvantage that may persist for years. (20) Whereas a child who is healthy, and socially and academically prepared is more likely to come to school each day ready to tackle the tasks at hand and accustomed to following a scheduled routine. Non-traditional family structure appears particularly problematic for young children as the cognitive and social behaviors developed early on persist throughout childhood and in later life (Manski et al., 1992).

Secondly differences in family structure have also been associated with variations in the sexual behavior of adolescents, including the likelihood of teenage pregnancy (e.g., Rosenbaum & Kandel, 1990; Wu & Martinson, 1993; Wu, 1996). It has been argued that adolescents from non-traditional families may model their sexual behavior on the dating or cohabiting relationships they see their parents engage in, that these adolescents may be less closely supervised, or that their risky behavior may be a result of the instability of family and their relationships with their parents during divorce (Moore & Chase-Lansdale, 2001).

Thirdly Coughlin and Vuchinich (1996) found associations between family structure and juvenile delinquency. Results indicated that being in a step or a single-parent family at age 10 more than doubled the odds of being arrested by age 14. Even when peer influence, socioeconomic status, and a child’s intelligence were held constant, family structure had significant effects on rates of delinquency. The authors conclude that parents in non-traditional families may be less able to closely monitor and supervise their adolescents, which can increase the likelihood of their child engaging in illegal activities.(28) The role of the “deficient family” in delinquency theory confirms the claim that children from unstable households are more likely to commit crimes starting at a younger age due to a number of reasons.

The use of illegal drugs at young ages is that findings suggest two effects of the timing of family disruption. First, children who experience divorce in adolescence are more likely to use drugs than those whose parents divorced years earlier. Adolescence years is a period of identify development and young people may be especially vulnerable to experimentation and peer pressure. Second, children whose parents divorced when they were young are more at risk than children from intact homes to increase drug use throughout their lives, suggesting that divorce has lasting and perhaps lagged effects on child outcomes. Surveying over 2,000 adolescents in the southeastern U.S. at two time points, Flewelling and Bauman (1990) found that adolescents from intact families were less likely to report experimenting with drugs and alcohol than adolescents from other types of families. Adolescents from step- or single-parent families were about 1.5 times more likely to have smoked a cigarette or used alcohol and more than twice as likely to have used marijuana.(25)

It is clear through case studies and research that a families structure whether it be good or bad has a detrimental affect a the child/adolescent outcome and not just academically but their well being and self morals. When statistics say that approximately 2% of youths are convicted of a crime before age 15, while 18, 29, 12, and 8% become sexually active, smoke, use marijuana, and drink regularly, respectively(Antecol, Heather, and Kelly Bedard, 8) It is hard not to look at the numbers and realize the massive affects that an unstable home can put a child through.

In conclusion, Full "recovery" is nearly impossible for children because of the dynamic nature of family life. While you and your ex-spouse's lives may go on separately with relatively little thought, your children will think about their loss almost every day. And 25 years after the fact, they will certainly be influenced by it. Life itself will remind them of the loss at even the happiest moments. As Earll explains: "Children never get over divorce.” It is a great loss that is in their lives forever. It is like a grief that is never over. All special events, such as holidays, plays, sports, graduations, marriages, births of children, etc., bring up the loss created by divorce as well as the family relationship conflicts that result from the 'extended family' celebrating any event."(Desai 2007)

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